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SOCIAL PROPERTY IN CUBA:  
THE IDEAL VERSUS THE REALITY

MARISA WILSON

‘El verdadero revolucionario no vive *de* la Revolución, vive *por* la Revolución’ [A real revolutionary does not live *from* the Revolution, he lives *for* the Revolution]. José Martí (cited by informants)

‘For it is not what *is* that makes us irascible and resentful, but the fact that it is not as it *ought* to be’. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (quoted by Dumont 1977: 108)

**Introduction**

In a discussion regarding the relatively recent (2007) political campaign to establish a new group of social workers in Cuba (*trabajadores sociales*), I asked people from Tuta<sup>1</sup> to explain these new workers to me. One woman replied: ‘They are young people, *disvinculados* [literally, those who are unbound to society], with problems in school or social problems.’ I asked her what kind of social problems and she responded:

They used to spend their time selling things on the street, engaging in non-productive activities and so on. They did not work for society (*la sociedad*), but took away from society. These people are targeted to go to special schools for *trabajadores sociales* and are given very intense ideological training. When they get out of school they work in Cuba or some get the chance to go abroad to work, to Nicaragua, Venezuela, Brazil ... and the state pays for everything. They are the bad ones yet they are being treated better than the *real* workers! And the normal people who work for society have to suffer!

In the same conversation, another woman spoke of the time before the ‘Special Period’ (the economic crisis of the early to mid-1990s, which for some Cubans persists into the present) when people who worked for ‘society’ got their just due back from the state. During this time, her daughter spent forty-five days a year working in the agricultural

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<sup>1</sup> As with the names of people mentioned below, I have disguised the name of the town where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork and its inhabitants as ‘Tuta’ and ‘Tutaños,’ respectively.

fields with her secondary school classmates. In return, the state provided her with things their family could not afford:

Our daughter's *quinceniera* [the Latin American coming-of-age party held for girls on their fifteenth birthday] was approaching, and we did not have enough money to buy her a nice outfit. She went with her class to work in the fields for the forty-five day period. And she came back with a large piece of nice fabric given to her by those in charge of the student brigade. I made her a beautiful blouse from it. [...] But now this kind of help for *normal* people doesn't exist. Now it is only party members and deviants who get help!

The juxtaposition of the two above comments is enlightening. In the first, a complaint is made about a group of people who, in the speaker's opinion, do not deserve to receive benefits from the state. In the second, a mother recalls a time when work done by her daughter was rewarded with material benefits. Viewed from a Cuban perspective, both discourses point to a single ideal: social property.

According to some people from Tuta I met during a period of ethnographic fieldwork (2005-07), the ideal of social property, which conforms to the communist adage: 'to each according to his needs, from each according to his capacity', is now being replaced by rewards to select groups in Cuban society such as *trabajadores sociales* or high-level members of the communist party, people who are not always seen as 'normal', that is, humble and hardworking members of society. In contrast to the accumulation of private property by individuals, in the state model that Cuba adopted in the early 1960s, individuals 'ought' to work to create and protect collective assets or social property, which is, in turn, redistributed as use values to secure the 'needs' of all members of society. Social property should be redistributed from the national centre to individual citizens in relation to their state-defined 'needs', as well as their work effort in producing collective assets.

Like many other aspects of Cuba (and elsewhere), the 'ought' of political economic ideas often contradicts the 'is' of reality. In this article, I will further explain how the ideal of social property is supposed to work in Cuban communism, at least through the eyes of Tutaños, and then turn to some local reconceptualisations of the concept, which, perhaps surprisingly, continue to reflect dominant understandings despite Tutaños' innovative strategies for economic survival. In the process, I hope to

reveal how people in Tuta find their own personal version of the state's moral economy – who is entitled to what – via a set of alternative values that are still partially drawn from those promoted by the communist state. Throughout the article, I use extensive quotes from interviews conducted with Tutaños, an anthropological strategy that aims to provide the reader with a more nuanced understanding of how a particular people view their world and what they can justly demand from it.

### **The ideal of social property in Cuba**

In all versions of Marxist-Leninism, state property is regarded as belonging to 'the people'; it is thus referred to as social property or the patrimony of the people. State property used in production makes more state property, and the latter is, in theory if not always in practice, distributed to the people via state distributive networks (i.e. places of work, neighbourhood distribution centres [*bodegas*], schools, etc.).<sup>2</sup> Production by workers creates goods which are passed on to higher levels and, in turn, redistributed to people at lower levels as social property.

One interviewee provided a detailed example of the network of Cuban institutions that are supposed see to it that local level *bodegas* and other distributive institutions have foodstuffs for the workers and population at large (at least in 2007; see footnote 2):

There is a Ministry of External Trade and a Ministry of Internal Trade. The latter is divided into the Major Empresa and the Minor Empresa. The Ministry of External Trade is in charge of supplying the Major Empresa, which is in charge of supplying the Minor Empresa. The Major Empresa gives a quota of foodstuffs – rice, beans, spices, meat, as well as bathing soap and washing-up soap – to the Minor Empresa, according, for example, to how many people in a certain locality hold *libretas* (ration books) with special dietary needs or how many workers there are in a work unit. This is how the people at the top keep records of where you live, who you live with and what kind of work you are doing. The Minor Empresa [in turn] distributes these goods to each municipality according to how many primary schools, work nuclei, hospitals, maternity wards, *bodegas* [distribution centres, etc.] they have. Tuta has five thousand work nuclei. All people of working age must work in order to receive their due. [...] It is all very well controlled.

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<sup>2</sup> Raul Castro's reforms in the past year have altered this situation somewhat, seemingly phasing out distribution to work centres and schools, as well as rations. The local effects of these gradual changes have yet to be studied by the author.

According to this explanation, the (re)distributive infrastructure in Cuba links the national, regional and local levels, making each Cuban citizen ‘legible’ (Scott 1998) to the Cuban state by keeping records not only of their nutritional needs, but also of their locations of work and residence (as well as their family situation). A concern for the nutrition, work and residential and familial status of each Cuban is thus the responsibility of institutions at each state level – national, provincial, municipal, council – each of which produces and distributes social property according to plans created by bureaucratic and political institutions at the uppermost levels. The paramount level is the National Political Bureau of the Cuban Communist Party.

Imbued in this process and other kinds of redistribution in Tuta is a valuation of the individual in terms of the norms of the Cuban communist system, that is, occupation, level of ‘culture’ (as measured, for example, by one’s reputation according to reports from citizens and/or the neighbourhood Committee for the Defence of the Revolution), whether or not a note has been written on one’s dossier with reference to illegal or ‘uncultured’ acts, etc. (see Wilson 2009a: 153-61). It follows that, underlying the conception (and practicable ideal) of social property is a normative view of the person as a noble worker who produces for the revolution and receives his just due from the revolution.

But the Guevarian ‘New Man’ of communism (Guevara 1971 [1965]), whose sole desire is to work for the collective patrimony, has not ‘yet’ been formed in Cuba. Indeed, as the 2007 [1999] version of the Cuban Rules of the Communist Party states (which I was only allowed to read in secret), the amount of state property at ‘this’ socialist *época* (era) is not *yet* sufficient to satisfy the needs of the population (Rules of the Communist Party 1999: 7). According to this line of reasoning, sometime in the future the socialist state will reach the highest level of communism, when it has the means to provide for the needs of all ‘the people as workers’ (ibid.). At this point in the ‘progression of humankind’ (ibid.: 3) money will be abolished, and the only concern of the worker will be his work, a symbol of his or her contribution to the social patrimony.

The normative (and cultural; see below) reasoning for who gets what and why, or the moral economy, is especially important in Cuba since so many ‘normal’ people are seeing scarce goods being diverted to special categories of people, such as *jefes* (high-

level officials or managers of state enterprises). As for many other areas in Cuban society, the relationship between one's occupation and one's rewards is, in local terms, 'complicated' (*complicato*), a word Cubans in Tuta used when referring to issues that may not be easy to discuss, often due to political sensitivities. In interviews, several persons (mostly party militants) claimed that it is right for workers and/or *jefes* at higher levels (such as members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces) to receive more from the state than those in lower positions because, as they said, 'those who are at higher levels do more work for us.' Many other people, however, found this system of graduated rewards and privileges unfair and contrary to socialist goals which set 'the people' above any one individual.

The argument that higher level officials do more work and, in turn, create more social property would perhaps be more convincing if it were not so evident to many Tutaños how many higher-level officials take advantage of their positions to obtain limited goods and resources, as well as how many illegal transactions (e.g. bribes) occur which benefit only those who hold special privileges. Just as there is a way to justify, in political and ideological terms, why some people in Tuta 'eat better' than others (in post-1990s Cuba at least, what one eats is a reflection of one's status; see Wilson 2009b: 6), so, according to one young Tutaño man, there is a way to justify the system of references whereby a person may get a 'better' job in, for example, the tourist service industry, with a good letter from his or her CDR (Committee for the Defence of the Revolution). The idea behind these references from high members of one's CDR is to reward Cubans who follow the example of Che's 'New Man' – he or she who is willing to give up the most time and money for the Revolution, that is, those who engage in a lot of voluntary work. In reality, such privileges may be due more to personal connections than revolutionary dedication.

Deviance from the ideal allocation of social property in Cuba not only jeopardizes the legitimacy of state officials, due to scarcities it also creates the need for locals to create alternative distributive networks. And, as I will argue in the next section, some of the ways Tutaños explain these alternative economic acts is via cultural codes imbued in the very system that often excludes them.

**Local reformulations of social property: *particulares*<sup>3</sup> and work value**

While the ideal of social property is linked to work effort and revolutionary dedication, it is obvious to many Tutaños that state benefits do not always accrue to the most productive, ‘humble’ (*humilde*) people. Personal factors often affect who gets what, as I have already indicated. Thus, despite the communist ideal of centralized redistribution, goods may be diverted at one of many levels by those who ‘grab’ from the state at intermediate stops in the distributive process.

Contrary to private vendors in socialist contexts such as contemporary China, for example, Cuban *particulares* who sell goods derived from both legal and illegal origins are largely not counted in the state distribution system; for this reason they often must buy the components of the products they produce illegally. The official explanation for excluding *particulares* from the state political economic structure may be that goods sold by private vendors, though increasingly seen as an essential addition to the insufficient quantities of items distributed by the state, are not officially recognised as social property. However, in the process of buying and selling, goods may become *localised* social property. When a scarce item such as cooking oil becomes available through black market networks, it is often available only for purchase to a particular group of people, that is, to friends, family or long-term clients of the vendor. Each has access to property exchanged between them largely because of their contribution to and inclusion in the network. Like the official distributive structure, access to black market goods is determined by personal relations. In these circumstances, devotion to the local and/or nuclear ‘family’ (*familiares*) and other looser-knit units (i.e. networks of traders and clients) must co-exist with or even supersede devotion to the national collective (see Wilson 2009a: 163-170).

Contrary to the views of some neoliberal economists (e.g. Ritter 1998), who view the black market in Cuba as a gateway to an emerging market society, goods exchanged between *particulares* and their clients are not ‘free’ flowing commodities at all. Like national networks distributing social property (at least as it is allocated in practice), these

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<sup>3</sup> *Particulares* are legal and illegal vendors who usually acquire goods through networks of (legal and illegal) suppliers and clients.

goods are moved through complicated channels involving personal relationships. It matters from whom one buys meat, for example. In Tuta, ‘everyone’ knew that *el chino* (the Chinese one)<sup>4</sup> sold better quality meat at the market than *el gordo* (the fat one). Indeed, as in other (post)-socialist countries, in Cuba ‘supply constrained’ (Verdery 1993: 174) consumers survive mostly by working around the system. And, an essential way of accessing goods is by acquiring information about their location and about people’s trustworthiness (Humphrey 1998; Verdery 2003: 62). Constant communication about where one may find a second-grade item such as fodder ‘taken’ from a factory floor characterizes the ‘acquisitionmanship’ (vs. ‘salesmanship’; Verdery 1993: 174) of such ‘economies of shortage’ (Kornai 1980). Indeed, as Anna Cristina Pertierra argues (2007: 121), personal relationships in consumption and exchange are more prevalent in socialist societies such as Cuba:

Consumers in all societies, whether socialist, capitalist or otherwise, can be seen to cultivate personal relationships that defuse the social distance that trade is often seen to create. Nevertheless, the emphasis in socialist states on the state-managed distribution of goods does seem to have a particular counter-effect in that many socialist consumers value even more highly their personal networks as a resource to offset state-imposed constraints.

While trade between looser-knit ‘communities’ of traders and clients resembles the ‘dark’ side of social property in practice (i.e. access through personal connections), closer-knit patterns of redistribution also encompass more orthodox values embedded in the communist system. For instance, often the way people valued goods allocated to the family and close friends was through the very work effort that went into locating or offering them. Indeed, quite a few Tutaños I spoke with used work as a foil for material values such as quality and variety. Because activity in the home is considered ‘work’ (*trabajo*) as much as paid work is, labour value in Cuba is the cultural scheme through which many Tutaño women rationalised serving foods that were not of the foreign recipient’s standards. When receiving a prepared dish, for example, the person giving

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<sup>4</sup> In Cuba, descendents of Chinese immigrants who have Asian features are often referred to as ‘*chinos/as*,’ just as Afro-Cubans are often called ‘*negros/as*.’ One of my Afro-Cuban friends told me once that such terms only denote racism when used in a negative or harsh manner, rather than the usual joking manner in which they are used.



me the food would often add: 'It is not the best food, but it is made with love.' And before I was served a meal, it was repeatedly made clear how much time it took to find all the ingredients necessary for its preparation:

I had to go to *La Loma* [the hilly area of town to buy the onions, the market to buy the cucumbers and garlic, the pizzeria a state-owned restaurant which includes a state kiosk that sells some foodstuffs] to buy rice, the *chopin*<sup>5</sup> to buy oil and to several houses to buy enough eggs. I didn't just go to *El Rápido* [literally 'The Rapid,' a store which sells imported and domestic goods in hard currency] to get all of the items at once, like you are used to! It is called *El Rápido* for a reason!

As opposed to strictly practical ideas of 'need' in the Cuban distributive system, such as nutritional requirements, in Tuta the kind of food one gets matters. Supplying provisions for the household or larger social grouping is not just about nutrition or nurture. For women especially, food provisioning is about other values, such as the amount of work it takes to locate goods and make a meal.

Like social property, provisions and cooked food represent more than just material goods to satisfy individual desires; these items also represent a sense of duty to the social group. While the boundaries between nation and family are often fluid, shared understandings and values allow people within their confines to determine who gets what and why.

## Conclusion

Edmund Leach wrote that concepts of property and ownership are very important for anthropologists as 'they provide the categories in terms of which social relations are linked with economic facts' (Leach 1965 [1954]: 141). In this brief article, I have tried to show how political constructs such as social property become cultural through economic and social processes that unravel in particular places through time. These processes are two-way, for, as Eric Wolf argued, there is a kind of 'intellectual politics in the creation of culture' (Wolf 1999: 141).

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<sup>5</sup> The '*chopin*' is pronounced like the English word 'shopping' and is used as a noun to describe places where food and other items are sold in CUCs (Cuban Convertible Dollars).

As in other places, in Cuba there is a dialectical relationship between top-down and bottom-up norms and actions, creating unique socio-economic and political patterns that are often missed by those whose sole focus in Cuba is the ‘iron fist’ of state power. In Cuba as in many other communities – whether national, local or otherwise – people are guided by an overarching ideology, but this tells only part of the story. As Louis Dumont wrote:

Any concrete, localized whole, when actually observed, is found to be decisively oriented by its ideology, and also to extend far beyond it ... in every concrete whole we find the formal principle at work, but we also find something else, a raw material which it orders and logically encompasses but which it does not explain, at least not immediately for us [the outside observers]. ... [This raw material] must ... be set in [its] place and related to the ideology which [it] accompan[ies] in fact, it being understood that *it is only in relation to the totality thus reconstructed that the ideology takes on its true sociological significance*. (Dumont 1980 [1966]: 37-8, emphasis in the original)

Although the ideal of social property has not (yet?) materialised in Cuban reality, it is still an important cultural code from which many Cubans in Tuta draw meaning. Indeed, as I have tried to illustrate here, the communist ideal of social property has a great bearing on the meaning and practice of informal exchanges on the ground. I have argued elsewhere (Wilson 2009a: Ch. 1) that in Cuban values such work and social property have historical roots: they are directly tied to the communist version of the person spread most widely in Cuba by the writings of Che Guevara. Despite the power of communist ideology, however, I have also argued (ibid.) that such cultural codes were formulated much earlier in Cuban history, especially through the writings of José Martí, one cultural ‘artefact’ who may indeed be the significant link between Cuban nationalism and Cuban communism.

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